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The Relationship between Play and Oral Language Development for 4 – 6 Year Olds in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of play in oral language development for children aged between four and six in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Through conducting an analysis of existing literature, the researcher found that there was little evidence with regard to classroom practice for this age range in the Kingdom. Evidence pertaining to the relationship between play and the development of oral language was presented, with the conclusion being drawn that play does have a significant role in children's language and literacy development, as well as general overall development. However, in view of the lack of information addressing this issue with regard to Saudi Arabia, the researcher recommends that there should be research conducted in this area within the classroom, in order to see whether policy documentation is in fact being implemented and the extent to which a genuinely child centred curriculum can be delivered within the Islamic culture.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Acknowledgment

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The importance of play in children's development must not be underestimated in the sense that it is regarded as being essential in contributing to "… the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children and youth" (Ginsberg, 2007, p. 182).

The above statement is illustrated by two specific reports in the United Kingdom regarding the importance of play in the early stages of children's development, which reinforces its position of prominence within the Early Years Foundation Stage [EYFS] (Scott, 2010 in Moyles, 2010, p. xvii). The Rose Report (2009) indicates that play should have a central role as a vehicle for delivering the curriculum, with all activities involving play explicitly promoting learning and development. Furthermore, it states that opportunities for play should be a combination of both planned and student led activities, as "learning together is the crucible for language development, learning to cooperate, learning the rules of good behaviour and much else" (Rose, 2009, p. 93).

 It is important that play is not regarded as some form of relief from the curriculum, with the Action Alliance for Children (2007) regarding it as the best way to implement statutory requirements and a key motivational aspect of children's learning. Alexander (2009 cited in Scott 2010 in Moyles, 2010, p. xvii) expresses the belief that play is so important to children's development that the Foundation Stage should continue beyond its current limit until the age of six.

It is critical that the holistic benefits of play are understood by those who are charged with educating children in their early years, in order that children are provided with the best possible start in their lives. Clearly, play has been recognised and placed at the forefront of Early Years education as a result of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF, 1989) and Guldberg (2009) states that there are increased numbers of children being diagnosed with mental health issues, which leads them to experience a loss of childhood as a result of increased pressures caused in modern living (for example, increased levels of testing and a diminishment of time spent being involved with and/or appreciating nature (Louv, 2005).

Elkind (2008) believes that as a result of a lack of opportunities to play, children's ability to be creative, to use their imagination and their curiosity, is being destroyed, stating that this is the direct result of an over emphasis upon toys which are readily available and the advent of handheld computerised devices, computers and television. In view of these concerns, it is important to investigate how play is utilised and the extent to which activities are designed for this age group, to ensure that they are fit for purpose and relevant, involving active engagement and first-hand experiences which encourage meaningful, long-lasting learning which motivates a love of learning (Moyles, 2010, p. 6).

1.2. Significance of the Study

With this in mind, this study will investigate the literature regarding the relationship between play and oral language development, concentrating upon the 4 – 6-year-old age group. The objective of this study is to examine the evidence concerning the relation of play in the oral language development of preschool children and how play impacts upon their overall ability to communicate and use storytelling "narrative" not only with their peers but also the adults who look after them. The results of this study have the potential to better inform future research into the benefits of play in the Saudi Arabian context.

1.3. Questions of the Study

The central question of the research is:

What evidence does the literature provide regarding the role of play in oral language development for 4 – 6 -year-olds?

This will be addressed through answering the following sub questions:

- What is play?

- What is pretend play?

- To what extent does active engagement in play provide opportunities for language acquisition and development in preschool children?

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This will be addressed by analysing existing literature on the concept of play and its impact upon children's development – particularly with regard to oral language. Subsequently, the methodology adopted for this study will be outlined, followed by a Discussion chapter. The conclusion of this dissertation will draw the study together and highlight possible additional areas of research which can be explored as a result of the findings of this study.

Chapter 2 Situating the research

2.1. Early Years Education in Saudi Arabia

The structure of the education system in Saudi Arabia begins with preschool education in the form of kindergarten, nursery schools and preschools (Saudi Arabia

Education, 2017), although this phase of education is still not compulsory (Al-Othman et al., 2015).

Currently, this early childhood phase of education follows a 'self-learning' curriculum approach which was adopted in 1986 (Alomar, 2013) and is regarded as "… a selective mix of Western ideologies that are compatible with Islamic principles" (Al-Othman et al., 2015, p. 2513). This is composed of different   educational units which focus upon specific topics such as water, health and safety, and sands. Each unit lasts for between two and four weeks and forms part of the daily timetable and includes activities such as indoor and outdoor play, circle time and snack time (Rabaah, Doaa & Asma, 2016).

This curriculum purports to engage children in freedom of movement and play, the encouragement of independence through research and discovery which sees the children interacting with their environment and those within it, with practitioners providing a balanced approach that meets the child's holistic needs (Alomar, 2013; Al-Othman et al., 2015). However, practitioners also have to meet the aims which have been laid down for early childhood education and deliver a specific curriculum (Alshaer, 2008; Albeiz, 2007) and are coping with a strategy which was last modified in 2005 (Al-Othman et al., 2015).

Gahwaji (2006) states that this self-learning curriculum was intended to move pedagogy from traditional methods towards more child-centred practices to provide a better quality of educational experience for the children whilst remaining applicable to Islamic culture. However, Gahwaji (2006) comments that a rights-based, child-centred approach to working with children is difficult within the Kingdom in that 'rights' only sits with a moral framework of right and wrong behaviour in terms of Islamic belief and not in respect of freedom and entitlement.

In addition, when one looks at documentation from the Ministry of Education (2013 cited in BinAli, 2013, p. 39 – 40), there is an absence of reference to play within the objectives of preschool education. There is extensive mention of adherence to Islam, the teaching of good behaviour, fundamental truth, the socialisation process, exercise, the cultivation of good habits, encouragement of imaginative thinking, making children happy and protecting against danger.

In Saudi Arabia, the aim of education in early childhood is the preparation of resilient children through a "… righteous upbringing" (Nyland and Alfayez, 2012, p. 396; supported by Aljabreen, 2017). Gahwaji (2006) observes that the government approach towards educational policy is one which is based upon the need to teach children about the practices and beliefs of Islam, leaving little room for autonomy in terms of learning and opportunities to play. This would appear to be at variance with Islamic teachings, which encourage adults to view young children with respect, as people who should be listened to, treated kindly, shown affection and provided with opportunities to play (Nyland and Alfayez, 2012).

There is an obvious tension between the necessity to instil and abide by Islamic principles and that of a child-centred approach towards education, leading to a different interpretation of 'child-centred.' Rajab (2016) comments that the self-learning curriculum in the Kingdom is based upon American High/Scope curriculum, with the teaching methods being informed through Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). This curriculum model allows children to make choices, to explore and to solve problems whilst interacting with their classmates and adults (Pramling et al., 2004), with adults acting as an equal participant in the production of knowledge and encouraging children's thinking and problem-solving skills (Castle, 2003). Providing children with opportunities to play fosters an attitude of "… learning for understanding" as opposed to "… learning to memorise" (Castle, 2003, p. 7).

However, this type of system necessitates an understanding of the importance, needs and interests of children as individuals and their right to be autonomous in their thinking. This is at variance with the system in Saudi Arabia, which has Islam at the centre of the sociocultural framework. Islam is at the heart of the education system, which is governed by religious beliefs, principles, practices, and social hierarchy which is predicated in adherence to strict rules (which need to be learnt and followed). Teachers are contractually bound to follow the instructions and guidance of their superiors in the implementation of the curriculum in the classroom, with monthly reports being generated on their performance, which impacts upon their pay and professional status. The sole focus of their instruction to children is to direct and guide them in the ways of Islam. Rajab (2016, p. 6 - 7) states that

"Although the recommended teaching methods are stated as self-discovery, research and investigation which seemed to design to allow the child autonomy, in practice, the dominant style of pedagogy is the Best Model of the Prophet Mohammed… [which] produces a transmissive view of teaching in which pedagogy is based on a set of rules or principles… [reducing teaching to] delivering information on modelling a set of behaviours which the child and copies."

Furthermore, Rajab (2016) comments that in spite of the fact that policy documents indicate the teacher should provide children with choice, this is not being followed in practice as a result of the best model of practice given above. This leaves practitioners with no authority to change or amend the curriculum to facilitate children becoming autonomous learners through play. They are not allowed to adapt units but "… match the children to the unit which has already been designed by the government to meet preset objectives" (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2013, p. 13).

 Similar comments can be found from the MOE with regard to gender, with practitioners being instructed to ensure that children "… are carrying out their gender roles correctly and to check whether they are following the correct modes of behaviour" (MOE, 2013 – 14, p. 134 – 135). There are also stipulations that children must not 'play' the role of the King or Princess or swap gender roles (MOE, 2013 – 14). Rajab (2016) notes that one school teacher states that religion prevents children from developing their ability to be creative, to use their imagination and to think, whilst others bemoan the fact that they are merely teaching children to learn information by rote without understanding its meaning and/or application.

Both Al-Mogbel (2014) and Alnashef (2003) reinforce the notion that early years education provides the foundation for all other learning. Aljabreen (2017) states that educators within the Kingdom believe that children will show interest in things that they believe to be vital for them, such as mathematics, reading, writing, structured play, learning to work both as an individual and as a part of a group, which leads them into the formal process of education in primary school (Badawood, 2006). Abdel-Rasool (1993, cited in Aljabreen, 2017, p. 71) goes as far as to say that this stage of a child's life has an impact upon their character and personality, and the development of their inclinations and abilities.

Badawood (2006) believes that early years provision is designed to be an extension of the family, which should look towards protecting children from danger, to learn the responsibilities and requirements associated with Islam and to prevent the development of antisocial behaviour. In addition, early years practitioners must also be mindful of the need to provide children with the means to learn language in an age-appropriate manner, whilst also developing the physical and mental attributes which are appropriate for children of this age.

Eldakak (2010) comments that the traditional approaches towards education have relied upon the transmission and learning of information as opposed to critical thinking and problem-solving. Saudi Arabia is attempting to move away from this mode of pedagogy in favour of a more creative environment to encourage the healthy development of young children (Kashkary and Robinson, 2006). This can be seen by the development of a standardised curriculum and a variety of different materials including language learning tools, toys and areas for the pursuit of art (Badawood, 2006).

However, Aljabreen (2017) and Rabaah, Doaa and Asma (2016) note that there is a distinct lack of information about this phase of education in Saudi Arabia. They comment that the most recent statistics which were available only covered the 2013/14 school year and that very few studies looked at early childhood education, with those that did being conducted in Arabic, making any comparisons with international practice extremely difficult. However, some that have been conducted have identified a lack of appropriate equipment to facilitate children's play (Bardis, 1982) and that outdoor spaces were an important aspect of early years provision (Saleem, 1989). Albeiz (2007) also notes that there was a general lack of awareness on the part of education officials with regard to the importance of this phase of education, whilst Al-Khireji (1992) found that although there was an awareness of international practice with regard to play, there was a lack of application of this knowledge within the Kingdom.

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Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1. Methodology and Ethics

It is important to recognise that the design of any research will be a reflection of the intentions and philosophy of the person conducting it which will impact on the direction and the approaches that are adopted in its completion (De Vaus, 2001; Hakim, 2000). Research methodology is concerned with how an individual will undertake a specific piece of research, given its context, their time and resources (De

Vaus, 2000), and their ability to produce a creditable, logical and valid study (Rajasekar et al, 2013: Kothari, 2004).

This piece of educational research – the accumulation of data for the purposes of better comprehension of the world of education (Opie, 2004) will not be empirical in nature in the sense that it will not involve the collection of first hand information by the researcher in a classroom environment (Mills, 2000). The researcher was of the opinion that through conducting a critical review of existing studies in respect of this issue, they would gain a deeper understanding of the issue, thus better enabling them to engage in a reflective process (Israel and Lassonde, 2007) to establish the nature of the relationship between play and oral language development in children between 4 and 6 years of age in Saudi Arabia.

In view of the nature and intention of this inquiry, the researcher made a conscious decision to engage with a critical literature review as the source of information as opposed to engaging with the collection of empirical data. This meant that there are no issues with informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity as outlined in the guidance provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011).

The researcher undertook a critical literature review of existing materials with regard to this issue (secondary data analysis). The intent of a critical literature review is to analyse extensive literature and evaluate it. In order to achieve this aim an extensive body of literature related to the topic will be reviewed, analysed and synthesized.. A critical review has to provide evidence of the value of previous related works (Grant & Booth, 2009).

 Specific information relevant to the study was gathered through the targeted use of key terms and phrases to identify pertinent information by searching electronic databases including PscyhINFO, Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts, SocINDEX, Web of Science and Education Resource Information Centre.

These terms and phrases, guided by the reserarch question included play, pretend play, the importance of play, the role of play in children's development, the role of play in language development, the role of play in language acquisition, and the role of play in oral language development.

The scope of this review was one encompassing global research in order for the researcher to draw conclusions based on as much data as possible, whilst retaining an emphasis on the position in Saudi Arabia. The selection of literature sources was not limited by date, nor limited to research papers related to the cases in Saudi Arabia but considers the global experience in the discussed topic. It was important to take into consideration the latest literature as well as to analyse some earlier basic sources.

In considering the central issue of the research, it was decided to eliminate (as far as possible) any data that did not specifically refer to the 4 – 6 year old age group, although it must be recognised that some of the information with regard to play will also include the lower part of the elementary age range.

Clearly, it is important for any researcher that they are able to authenticate the resources that they rely upon as part of their own research (Bryman, 2008). To that end, the researcher concentrated her efforts in using mainly (but not solely) peer-revewed sources which specifically refer to play, to oral language development and examples of practice, and to utilse information from texts and studies.

An advantage of utilising this approach to this study was that in conducting a critical literature review, there was more opportunity to look at the issue from diverse perspectives, and therefore the critical literature review was conducted by including date and research design (Triparthy, 2013; Hair et al., 2011; Bryman, 2008). The disadvatages of utilising this approach inceude its complex and time consuming nature (Bhavsar and Waddington, 2015).

The material has been the subject of thematic analysis. This is a process which allows the themes to refine the search from the collected data to studies that address this specific issue and those which concern the role and significance of play in children's overall development, with particular emphasis on oral language development (Willig, 2013; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012).

It is important that the researcher has a good grasp of the data through repeated reading, with notes being taken at each stage/reading to ensure maximum understanding (Javadi and Zarea, 2016). Thematic analysis is useful in that it allows researchers to examine the issue from a number of different perspectives and

summarise key features, thus allowing the handling of large amounts of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). The researcher is fully cognisant of the fact that they will influence the research to a degree as a result of the materials that they decide to use and/or omit despite establishing explicit search criteria (Tracy, 2013; University of Leicester, 2009).

Chapter 4 Literature Review

4.1. Introduction

Play can be regarded as "… an umbrella term" (Bruce, 1991, p. 29) which has no precise definition (Briggs and Hanson, 2012; Miller and Almon, 2009; Lillemyr, 2009). Play is active, communicative, sociable and interactive, adventurous and risky, enjoyable, involved, meaningful and symbolic (Ginsberg, 2007). Pellegrini and Smith (1998) defining play, stated that play means specific behavior when players (usually children) may involve a specific activity or follow specific rules, the activity can be solitary or social.

Gordon (2008) performed research in order to define the "play" term. As a result of the research, the author stated that play is:

> "…the voluntary movement across boundaries, opening with total absorption into a highly flexible field, releasing tension in ways that are pleasurable, exposing players to the unexpected, and making transformation possible. Transformations occur as frames bisociate and the parts and the whole interpenetrate, increasing the differentiation of the part, the integration of the whole, and the range, coordination, and spontaneity of movement between and among them."

In a fact, according to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1992), play is a capability to "move or operate freely in a bounded space".

Imagination is an important component of play. Connecting Piaget's rationalisation of the child's imagination with the Kantian notion of imagination, Sutton-Smith argues that rationalisation and the imagination are in fact two diametrically opposite notions, the bringing together of which greatly complicates attempts to theorise 'play'.

Describing Kant's notion of the imagination as something that is essential for our processes of thinking, he outlines the Kantian position that empiricism alone cannot be used to generate hypotheses about human imagination and thought; Kant's "positive view of the imagination consequently became a fundamental plank in the intellectual platform of historical enlightenment, and it had recently helped generate a more positive view of play" (p. 96).

Sutton-Smith goes on to postulate that there is a distinction between the 'imagination' and the 'playful imagination', arguing that the idea of play cannot be brought down to rationalistic discourses: "Play doesn't just consider possibilities in some rationalistic way, as many modern interpreters like to believe."

Muller (2015) also discussed the connection between play and imagination. According to the author's findings, imagination is an important component of the scenario of a play. The imagination defines the children's ability to adapt to the changes within a game or provides more options to react to other player's behavior or reaction. Imagination is a factor that makes a game more playful. Another author (Vygotsky, 1978) also agrees that imagination provides more opportunities to a player to realize and demonstrate creative which provides a play with different options of scenario.

Children engage in it as a natural part of their development which affords them opportunities to discover the extent of their abilities, both alone and in the company of others; play allows for social, emotional and physical development whilst exploring their environment and communicating with others (Bruce, 1996; Wood, 2004; Ginsberg, 2007; Pollard et al., 2008; Macintyre, 2012).

Interaction as one of the play characteristics means that at least two children interact with each other during the game. Another characteristic is believed in the game objects, when children can substitute materials, words or actions which are not real, as well as children expected to believe in their role in the game. Other characteristics of play include but not limited by: flexibility, open end of the game, voluntary, enjoyable, motivating, self-selected and directed, also it can be individual or played in groups (Hughes, 2003).

The process of a play subsumes a range of behavior that demonstrates children's motivation, understanding of a game, shows their skills and opportunities. Participating in a play helps children to develop some skills and to understand some serious subjects in a joyful form. (Strom, R. D., & Strom, P. S., 2005)

Smith (2010) referred by Krasnor and Pepler (1980) stated the "intrinsic motivation" as a guiding thinking tool on what is a play and what is not. The second "non-literary" criterion refers to "if" element of a play. "Positive effect" that includes joy and fun is the third criteria highlighted by the author. The last criteria explain that child

participating in a play is more interested in a process itself rather than in outcome. Krasnor and Pepler (1980) also argued that "no one criterion is sufficient to say something is playing, but that the more criteria are present, the more agreement we will have that the behavior is play. Thus, rather than a rigid distinction between "play" and "non-play" (Smith, 2010, p. 6).

Play helps children to construct knowledge which facilitates their understanding of the society in which they are living and the varying roles that they have to adopt within it, inclusive of norms with regard to communication (Elkind, 2007; Robson, 2006; Froebel in Bruce, 2004, p. 132; Rogoff, 2003).

Children experiment in their use of language as they interact with their peers and others within specific environments during play, which provides them with opportunities to develop both communication and social skills (Duarte & Gutierrez-Gomez, 2007). In essence, "play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children and youth" (Ginsberg, 2007, p. 182).

4.2. Types of Play

Play can be categorised in two ways - structured and free, with four specific types of play being evident - imaginative, construction, creative and physical (Lillemyr, 2009). Structured play is that which is guided, planned and led by adults. It is structured in such a way that it maintains the interest of the children by keeping them active and engaged with their learning, through experimentation and the learning of skills, having observed them being performed by an adult. Structured play activity must be

appropriate to the level of the children for which it is designed, providing them with appropriate levels of challenge whilst maintaining enjoyment of their learning. In contrast, free play is led by the children, with adults providing materials, resources and equipment, leaving the children to create and motivate their own learning. In this situation, children are seen to work things out for themselves, thus gaining a deeper understanding of their learning. In many ways, this approach towards learning is a return to a bygone age where children played with what was available to them and

concentrated on process rather than product, which is a critical aspect of development in a child's early years (Lillemyr, 2009).

4.3. Pretend Play

Pretend, fantasy and symbolic play are imaginative play, which is often referred to as role play or socio-dramatic play. Pretend play affords children the opportunity to practice and gain understanding of a number of aspects of daily life where they play different 'everyday' roles such as a doctor, a nurse, a shopkeeper or a farmer. They can also engage in home making play, with the children using a different array of props and clothing to improvise and mimic the behaviour that they have observed at home. Fantasy play sees children pretending to be someone that they can never be, such as Batman or Spiderman. Symbolic play can be seen as children use objects during the course of their activities to represent something else, for example, using a broom handle to represent a horse (Lillard et al., 2012).

Construction play provides opportunities for children to use a variety of different manufactured or non-manufactured materials in order to make things, with their product being entirely the result of their own imagination and experimentation (Lillemyr, 2009). Creative play involves activities such as drawing, painting, art, craft, dance and music, all of which allow children to express their emotions.

Physical play allows children to develop their physical skills through running, jumping, crawling, climbing and improving their balance. This type of activity is important not only for children's health but also in order to develop their problem-solving skills (Lindon, 2001; Krause et al., 2003).

All of these types of play are active in nature, which affords children opportunities to develop their problem-solving skills by thinking creatively, develop their social skills and their language through interacting with others in their environment and to learn through authentic experiences whilst engaging in higher-level thinking skills (Swift, 2017).

4.4. Approaches to Children and learning

Placing children at the centre of the overall learning activities is based upon the constructivist school of thought as put forward by philosophers and theorists such as

Froebel, Piaget and Vygotsky. These thinkers share the notion that children are active when they learn through their own discoveries, building upon their existing knowledge base through interacting with every environment in which they find themselves (Moore, 2000).

Frobel argued that children were more effective learners if they were allowed to interact during the course of play, as opposed to being taught by adults, which led him to the notion of the kindergarten - literally- 'children's garden'- that that allowed children to be nurtured like growing plants (Schunk, 2012). This type of environment constructed sees the practitioner acting as a form of facilitator who provides opportunities for children to engage in imaginative play, the acting out of stories, and telling their own stories in their own way (Tovey, 2013). In essence, children were not subjected to the passive reception of information but were engaged in challenging first-hand experiences (Tovey, 2013).

As a result of scientific study, Piaget formed the view that children developed in set stages – preoperational, sensorimotor, formal operational and concrete operational (Krause et al., 2003) - with each stage building upon the preceding one. Engaging children in practice play is the sensorimotor stage whereas the preoperational involves children learning from symbolic, fantasy and pretend play (Lindon, 2001; Krause et al., 2003).

The concrete operational stage is one at which learners are able to demonstrate logical thought and empathy, with the formal operational seeing the development of deductive reasoning and the ability to handle abstract ideas (Cherry, 2017). Piaget argued that learning and development occurred via a process of assimilation and accommodation - children add their new experiences to those previous and, having had time to reflect upon them, amend those cognitive processes and actions to reflect their new knowledge (Piaget, 1973, Curtis and O'Hagan, 2003).

It is important to recognise that some scholars have questioned Piaget's assertions about the set stages of learning and have stated that his work focuses too much on the biology of development, ignoring the relevance of interacting with others in a social context (Schunk, 2012; Wood, 1998).

As with Piaget, a central tenet of the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) was the idea that learners are able to actively construct their own knowledge. However, he did place

emphasis on the significance of social interaction in learning and in the development of language and communication skills (Buchan, 2013).

Vygotsky regarded play as one of the most important avenues through which children can learn and improve their thinking skills, stating that whilst playing a child is "… always above his average age, above his daily behaviour, in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 129). It was his belief that this process of interaction provided opportunities for children to learn from others within their immediate environment, to learn their social role and to develop their communication skills through solving problems through play (Pound, 2005).

Vygotsky observed that in the initial stages of their learning, young infants copied the behaviour of others and reacted to the body language and gesture of those speaking to them, prior to being able to demonstrate their own communication skills having practised them within the confines of social interaction (Alexander, 2010; Pound, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). He contended that it was during the course of their early years that children moved from mimicking the behaviour of others to purposeful action and reaction, as a result of taking part in active pretend play which allowed them to understand the roles that society expects of them (Bodrova and Leong, 2015). His observations also led him to believe that play was the means through which children were able to come to terms with abstract thought and self-control in order to conform to those roles (Bodrova and Leong, 2015), with the understanding of those roles coming about as a result of learning from and with more experienced others.

Vygotsky argued that there was a palpable difference between the levels that learners were able to attain on their own as opposed to those obtained with the help of others, with this difference between what learners can do without help and what they can not do being labelled the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Johnston & Nahmed-Williams, 2009; Pound, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978).

As highlighted in the introduction, a child centred provision lies at the heart of Early Years education in the United Kingdom, with play being regarded as one of the central elements that is critical to children's learning of essential skills (Moyles, 2010; Rose, 2009). To that end, it is of vital importance that the activities and/or the equipment that is made available to children for play provide opportunities for them to be able to link their experiences to their everyday lives, in order that they are able

to have meaningful experiences which will contribute to their holistic development (Greenwood et al., 2015).

Different writers hold different views with regard to the purpose of play. Gee (2008) regards play as a device for children to learn their roles and prepare for their future lives which is influenced by the society and culture where children are brought up (Panksepp, 2008).

Some educators focus on the need for play to be guided by nature (Elkind, 2008), whilst others concentrate on the fact that children's experiences should be enjoyable (Bergen, 2009) and develop their ability to think independently (Sarama and Clements, 2009). Miller and Almon (2009) focus on the different types of play that are evident in kindergartens, for example, symbolic play, rule-based play, and motor play, all of which should be regarded as a vehicle which allows children to learn how to learn; this necessitates careful design of activities which cater for the specific needs of each child in a setting in order that they are age and stage appropriate (Walsh et al, 2006 cited in Briggs and Hanson, 2012, p. 8), and provide opportunities for children to reflect upon their learning (Nilson, 2010).

4.5. Play and Language

The ability to communicate is, arguably, the most important skill that individuals need to acquire in order to participate both socially and economically in the future (Hutchin, 2013). Mayesky (2012) and Orr and Geva (2015) suggest that there is connection between symbolic actions and symbolic language development which can only be achieved as a result of interacting with others.

Furthermore, Mayesky (2012) suggests that when children organise their own play activities, they use languge which displays a greater degree of confidence as a result of their speaking with and listening to each other, thus gaining confidence and experimenting with a greater range of vocabulary.

This observation suggests that independent play in which children are given the autonomy to interact freely with each other is conducive to collaborative learning in which children can learn together through the act of playing. Moyles (1995) contends that children's use of language is a reflection of what they have learnt as a result of

being involved in play, and that the procedure of explaining what they are doing, and/or have done, helps them to understand their experiences. Children's use of language demonstrates their ability to engage with different oral language text types such as description, personal response, recounting, narrative, procedure, report, explanation, exposition and discussion (Hill, 2012). Children are able to engage in play in order to develop different skills and language features. For example, children can describe different characteristics of things or events as well as using words which express judgement about their feelings towards a specific occurrence and/or book they are reading as a part of play activities.

In addition, they are able to retell a series of events which can be drawn from a book or real-life, with the aim of entertaining or amusing themselves or as a part of specific learning. As a part of their play, children can also be seen to teach someone how to do something, to describe or report something, in order that others are able to understand and to explain how and/or why an event occurs, and to persuade and/or negotiate with others to look at specific situations from different perspectives as a part of discussions (Hill, 2012).

Saracho (2012) contends that play not only allows children to learn specific skills and social conventions which support language development, but it also provides them with an avenue to experiment with language in order to express themselves fully, and for them to develop the use of their imagination. Children using their imagination is an integral part of pretend play, an activity which allows children to verbalise their experiences as well as experiment with different forms of communication skills (for example, gesture) through the process of interacting with those around them (Saracho, 2012; Bruce and Spratt, 2011).

The value of this process was demonstrated in a study by Levy (1992) whose findings indicated that the children had a greater range of vocabulary, inclusive of words which describe places, numbers, shapes and colours through engaging in socio-dramatic play. There is also evidence which suggests a relationship between improving children's oral language skills and their reading skills (Cunningham & Neuman, 2008), and links between children's ability to manipulate different media as a result of engaging in social interaction through play (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton 2012).

4.6. Oral language

Oral language is described as the basis on which literacy can be built (Hill, 2012). Bayetto (2015) states that oral language has two components - expressive language and receptive language. Expressive language involves individuals using words and non-verbal communication skills to impart meaning to others, whereas receptive language concerns listening and the process of comprehending the meaning of the information which is being shared by someone else.

It is important to recognise that the process of understanding not only involves listening but listening to the way in which things are said through tone and intonation, and the use of gestures which emphasise specific meanings. The meaning of any communicative process is also influenced by the relationship between the participants, in the sense that there are discernible differences between the way in which a child speaks to an adult, in contrast to when they speak to one of their peers (less formal, more colloquial language and the use of gesture) (Bayetto, 2015).

> Development and acquisition of the skills begin in early childhood prior to children focusing on print-based ideas such as decoding and the linking of sounds and symbols.

> Oral language, according to Hill (2009), provides a synthetic base, phonological base, and semantic base for further development of speaking, writing and reading skills. Development and acquisition of the skills begins in early childhood prior to children focusing upon print-based ideas such as decoding and the linking of sounds and symbols.

> The phonological process can be categorized into three groups: assimilation, substitution, and syllable structure. Phonological awareness "involves the ability to reflect explicitly on the word structure, understanding it as a sequence of phonemes and/or syllables" (Rosal et al., 2013 p.838).

> Vocabulary (semantics), as Bayetto (2015) indicates above, consists of both expressive and receptive language. That is, receptive vocabulary essentially entails a comparison between an external and an internal representation of a word whereas expressive vocabulary entails the additional process of reproducing the phonological representation of the word. If one accepts this

analogy, then it is possible to make predictions about the impact of the different book reading experiences. (pp. 124-125).

In addition, Salmela (2013) states that oral skills include the ability states that this also involves the ability to distinguish multiple meanings of words (homonyms), figurative language, different shades of meaning, and a variety of different relationships between words (synonyms, analogies, antonyms). Grammar (syntax) involves an understanding of the set structure of language and the rules which allow different combinations of words and phrases to make sentences, and in turn how sentences are combined together to make paragraphs.

Morphology (by some regarded as a sub category of vocabulary or grammar) concentrates on the small units of meaning within specific words and the rules about how words are formed, inclusive of an understanding of notions such as prefix, suffix and the root of words. While children learning morphological systems don't encounter morphemes. (Ramscar et al., 2015). Pragmatics covers the social use of language and acceptable behaviour regarding conversations – for example, keeping personal space, taking turns, appropriate behaviour in respect of adults and/or those in authority and with those of the same age.

This also covers developing an understanding of expected behaviour in specific situations and group dynamics, which in turn provides a preparation for a greater degree of understanding in both listening and reading in later life (for example, greeting people correctly and using the words 'please' and 'thank you' in an appropriate manner).

Discourse involves both oral and written communication. It is a critical skill which allows individuals to understand different forms of writing (narrative storytelling, informational text) and the different structures which govern how they are written.

According to Bradfield et al. (2013), the Comunication Trust (2013), Gross (2013), Hill (2012), Hougen & Smartt (2012), Winch et al. (2010), Resnick & Snow (2009), Kirkland & Patterson (2005) and Fillmore and Snow (2002), oral language forms the basis of children's ability to develop literacy skills and provides good information as

to how well children will read and write, whilst also providing good indicators about their overall academic achievement.

Absolutely critical to this process is the availability of high-quality classroom interaction, which motivates pupil engagement and improves their communication skills (Communication Trust, 2013), which can provide opportunities for children to develop their first language in the appropriate cultural context (Bayetto, 2015). Resnick and Snow (2009) make the point that whilst it is important for children to learn the rules which surround English, the means through which the language is acquired should not impinge upon their personal heritage. Having said that, Bayetto (2015) makes the point that it is important that children who have a bilingual background should be encouraged to use both languages, using Standard Australian English as the medium through which they will be taught and communicate in the educational community. Clearly, being able to communicate properly is critical to children's development, as

> "Speaking and listening are academic, social, and life skills that are valued in school and in the world… [and] academically, children are judged in part, by what they say and how they say it."Resnick and Snow (2009, p. 2)

Bayetto (2015) attests that prior to attending formal schooling, children have started to develop their speaking and listening skills as a result of interacting with others and as they develop an understanding of how to adjust their language to have others meet their needs, depending upon the situations in which they find themselves.

The oral language tradition that children have via these interactions in the home environment are built upon by practitioners, who employ explicit instruction methods to develop speaking and listening skills, as well as vocabulary, so that the ability to express meaning and develop sentence structure can be extended through speech. As children turn their attention to reading and writing, they begin to make the links between spoken and written language which can be read, making the acquisition of oral language an important priority in a child's early development;

> "Any weakness or developmental delay at core oral language skills may act as a bottleneck and constrain the ability to engage in higher level comprehension processes, such as inference making and integration." Babayigit (2012, p.1)

It is only through practising language that improvements can occur, with Resnick and Snow (2009, p. 3) stating that

> "… engaging in stimulating talk is the only way young children can expand their own language skills-learning words, putting sentences together, and practising the 'rules of talk.'

It is from this foundation that children make links between their speech and the written word, often making that connection before they are able to read and write themselves (Bayetto, 2015). Bayetto comments that as children learn to read, they draw upon their existing knowledge of oral language, making connections between written texts and developing an understanding of the differing uses of words in a written context. It is only through developing speaking and listening skills that children are able to participate in play, and in discussions, in order that they are able to think creatively and respond to the different forms of language that are presented to them (visual, written and spoken). It is only through engaging in oral communication that children are able to improve their listening skills, which has an impact upon their understanding of written text and their ability to make connections with their prior learning (Bayetto, 2013).

According to Morrow et al. (2016; also see Kennedy et al., 2012), speaking and listening form the oral side of the art of the English language, observing that oral language and written language enjoy a reciprocal relationship with each other, with oral language informing written language and written language influencing oral language.

Oral language is the basis upon which children are able to learn to read and write, stating that speaking and listening skills are critical to the future success of children's reading and writing and, indeed, success within the school environment. Furthermore, they comment that individuals who do not achieve oral language skills   early age find it difficult to keep pace with their peers as they move through the school system, even falling behind before they begin their formal education. According to Biemiller and Slonim (2001 cited in Roskos et al., 2016, p. 2), children from age 3 onwards should be building a vocabulary base at a rate of 2500 words per year.

The importance of oral language is seen by the way in which it underpins children's ability to communicate both in oral and written forms (Reeder and Baxa, 2017). Oral

language can be seen as a skill (Lawrence and Snow, 2011) as well as an essential means through which individuals are able to move from modelling to application (Vygotskian/scaffolding perspective).

Lawrence and Snow (2011) believe that the skill of oral language is essential if children are to be successful in terms of literacy in their later childhood, regarding it as a prerequisite to being able to understand what they read, making it vital that there is adequate support for the acquisition of oral language skills in early childhood. Having oral language skills is fundamental if children are to participate in the effective learning of vocabulary and the development of comprehension skills. This aspect is particularly important in the period prior to children being able to read independently and when they are extending their reading through tackling challenging texts.

The Vygotskian/scaffolding perspective involves understanding that participation in oral discourse through interacting with others is the means through which individuals are able to experience and to respond to various different texts, leading to a greater degree of comprehension skills. Interaction also facilitates children's practice of negotiation and reasoning skills, and perspective taking, which aids their comprehension (and eventually their writing).

According to Lawrence and Snow (2011, p. 323), the most important task within early years education is to develop children's oral discourse, defining this as "… extended oral productions, whether monologic or multi-party, centred around a topic, activity or goal." They also state that this involves developing skills that are unique to oral discourse, which allow for extended, specifically focused interactions and/or explanations, which can be seen as children engage in play.

According to Law (2015), the importance of language development and the acquisition of language is that it is language itself which provides children access to the social world, the ability to interact with others, to form relationships and to learn. Law (2015, p. 6) uses the analogy of a tree in explaining how language develops in learners.

Law's Tree Analogy for Learning
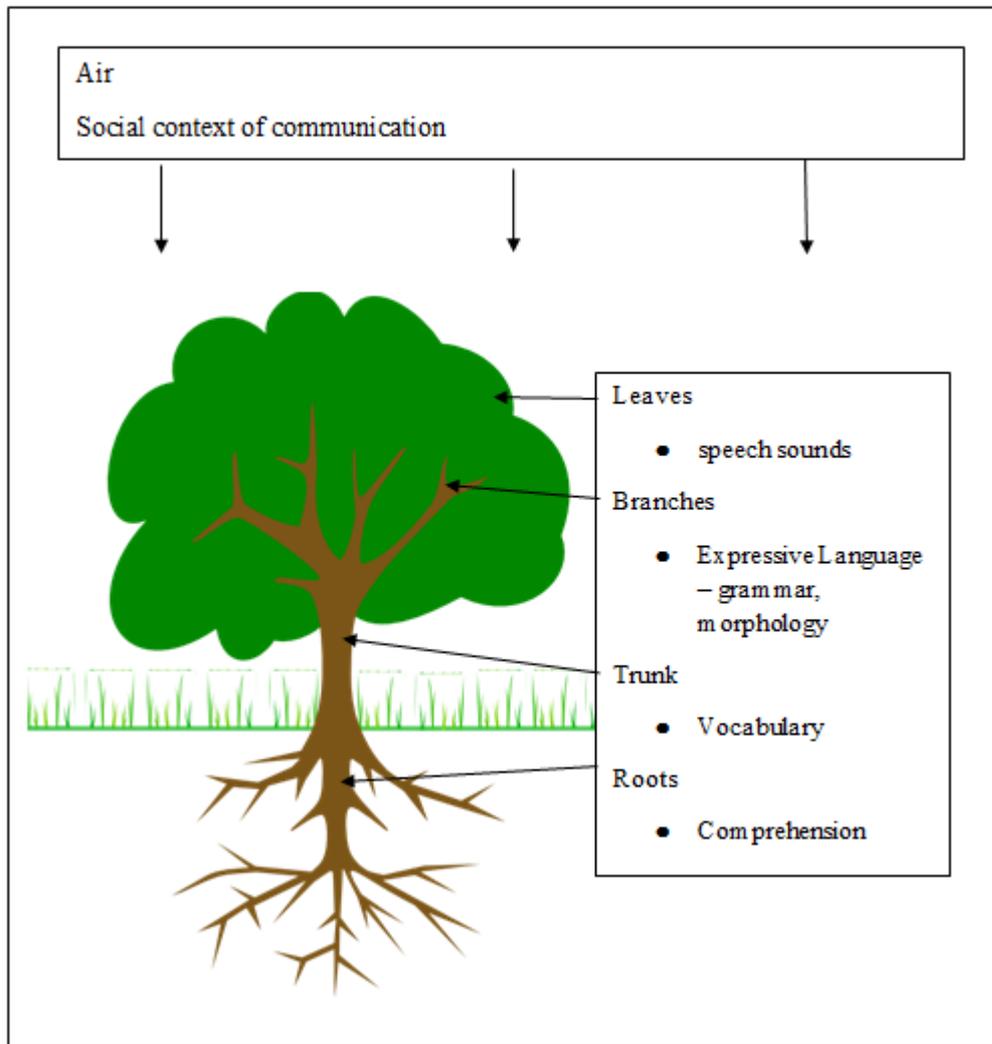
Figure 1 (Law, 2015, p.6)

He explains that comprehension is the route which underpins all expressive language. If children are able to understand what those around them are saying, they are more likely to be able to utilise those expressions when they communicate. However, Law (2015) makes the point that understanding can sometimes be difficult and will depend upon the context in which words and sentences are constructed and delivered. As we can see above, the social context is the air which surrounds the tree, which impacts upon how every aspect of language and its use develops.

Children quickly learn to adapt to the different environments to which they are exposed, which are commonly triggered by the different (yet set) routines which accompany different experiences in their lives. The majority of children acquire these skills over the first few years of their lives, but there are those who need to catch up with their peers on entering the sphere of formal education. Clearly, it is important

that not only verbal but social communication skills are acquired so that children are able to understand what is being asked of them, which can be achieved by adults slowing down their speech and the repetition of words and phrases to aid comprehension. Language acquisition, for most children, is a relatively straightforward process which is facilitated by the right sort of stimulation, making them ready for each distinct phase in their lives.

Weisberg et al. (2013) recognise the links between language performance and play, suggesting that play provides prospects for children to increase their symbolic thinking and make links between objects and symbols, leading eventually to abstract thought. However, it must be noted that it is still a matter of conjecture as to whether children who have more opportunity to play, have more language skills (Weisberg et al., 2013).

 The process of social interaction, as displayed within socio-dramatic play, helps children to develop the skills of negotiation, collaboration and coordination which has a positive impact upon their language development, as a result of having to adopt (and understand) a variety of different roles and make use of verbal skills which are more complicated than they would use in ordinary conversation (Kostelnick et al., 1989 cited in Saracho, 2012, p. 146). This enables children to experiment with their language production, as well as their listening which aids understanding (Weisberg et al., 2013).

Children also benefit from support from adults in their play, particularly in terms of the development of their vocabulary as a result of active questioning, which allows children the opportunity to reflect upon what they are doing. Weisberg et al. (2013) state that there is a direct correlation between children's language skills and adult involvement in their play during the early years of their development.

It is this adult involvement with children's play in terms of facilitating interactive activities which helps in the development of children's oral language. Browne (1996, p. 7 cited in Smidt, 2007, p. 76) states that the development of oral language is critical, in that

> "… all learning depends upon the ability to question, reason, formulate ideas, pose hypotheses and exchange ideas with others. These are not just oral language skills, they are thinking skills."

The ability to think also has implications with regard to performance during the course of an individual's early years of formal schooling. Roulstone et al. (2011) discovered that children's oral language development has an impact upon their performance on entering formal schooling and that the acquisition of oral language is dependent upon the social background from which they come and the levels of stimulus that they encounter within the home environment. They stress that it is the latter point which is more influential as a predictor of language development, in the sense that if children are provided with exposure to a language rich environment, irrespective of their social background, their language acquisition will be improved.

Mielonen and Patterson (2009) believe that children are able to develop their language and literacy through play as a result of interacting with the people that are within their environment at any given time. Literacy skills develop as a result of oral language acquisition, which occurs as children interact with their parents, their families, their teachers and their classmates during the course of play activities. It is through the process of play that children develop their communication skills and learn how language works while simultaneously learning how to interact appropriately with those around them (Mielonen and Patterson, 2009).

 Tsao (2008) comments that children develop their language and literacy skills from listening to the language that is spoken around them, which is in line with the thoughts of Vygotsky and the social nature of learning. Play, a social activity, enables children to have authentic experiences (Klenk, 2001), which helps to develop their cognitive skills and their use of symbols in language (Hall, 1991). Hall (1991) stresses that symbolic play helps children's language development by proving opportunities to experience how sounds and symbols work as they interact and communicate with those with whom they are playing.

Whilst engaged in socio-dramatic play, children make use of language to the extent that they create a form of script which sees an amalgamation of both reading and writing in their play (Mielonen and Patterson, 2009; Saracho and Spodek, 2006). Through encouraging children to engage in playful learning, teachers are able to

> "… develop the children's literacy learning in the context of play, provide opportunities for quality interactions and cultivate spontaneous and flexible literacy behaviours in young children."

Saracho (2004, p. 205)

According to Hill (2010, p. 4), "… play is multidimensional in the way it contributes to oral language", with oral language being only one means of making meaning alongside other forms of communication such as auditory, visual and spatial. In her opinion, oral language is central to development and learning, particularly within the school environment, as it is a focal point for teaching and learning.

Both oral and written language are important but each provides learners with the opportunity to access knowledge in different ways, with oral language being particularly effective in terms of sharing ideas with others to develop thinking skills and understanding. Oral language makes use of signs and symbols which are specific to individual cultures whilst talking out loud allows individuals to plan, memorise and to regulate their behaviour (Hill, 2010). As we have seen above, there are many different aspects to oral language, all of which contribute to children's language development and their ability to read.

Hall (2010) reports that oral language development can be enhanced through structured and pretend play scenarios from materials supplied in a box which the practitioners were able to utilise to develop oral language through questioning. The questions were designed in order to help children to describe things, to analyse things and to sequence and retell things, as well as think about what could and/or might happen in the future.

Opportunities to extend the children's vocabulary were found through reading texts out loud. The use of narrative was encouraged, with practitioners helping children to develop stories based upon their play experiences by helping them to describe and retell sequences, which then led to problem solving and creativity. This enabled the practitioners to utilise children's oral language skills whilst scaffolding their learning in preparation for more complex writing and reading, as well as to encourage children's interaction with each other (Dickinson and Neuman, 2006).

The type of play described by Hall (2010) is imaginative, creative, fantasy or pretend play. This type of play typically begins when children are approximately 12 months old and runs through childhood. It becomes particularly noticeable at approximately four years of age, when children seem to be able to play out specific scenes over a number of days (Stagnitti, 2011). According to Stagnitti (2011), pretend play is a

thinking skill because children use objects to be something else (for example, a shoebox being a bed), they give properties to objects (for example, the doll being asleep in the bed) and refer to objects that are invisible (for example, the doll's dog being asleep next to her bed). It can also involve treating an object as though it is alive (for example, the doll), with conversations taking place between children and their dolls.

This type of play also involves them taking the role of a specific character (a doctor, a nurse), which enables children to develop their understanding of the roles that these people have and what they say during the course of carrying out that role. As this type of play develops, children can be observed adding problems to their stories, enabling them to learn about cause and effect. Symbolic thinking is enhanced through pretend play, where (Moyles, 2012) children arrange the world to suit their purposes and needs, and is more often than not socially driven – particularly in the context of a nursery or preschool. Katz (2011 cited in Moyles, 2012, p. 128) states that the benefits of this type of play lie not only in social and emotional development but also in developing an enhanced understanding of the world around them, the use of language, the feelings of others and how to negotiate with others.

The development and use of narrative is an important part of pretend play. Abbott (2008, p. xv cited in Thomas, 2016, p. 1) states that "narrative is everywhere that human beings are", whilst Fulton (2005, p. 1 cited in Thomas, 2016, p. 1) believes that "our sense of reality is increasingly structured by narrative."

Another theorist, Roland Barthes (1977 cited in Thomas, 2016, p. 1) argues that narrative was simply a part of life and that it took many forms; he observed that narrative not only took the form of language but also mime and art demonstrated that it should be regarded as a multimodal concept. In his view, narrative helps us to understand and define the way that we view the world and experience it, providing an avenue for our development which impacts upon our actions and interaction with others.

According to Heath (1986, p. 84) narratives are "… verbalised memories of past or ongoing experiences" which often follow predictable patterns in terms of structure and content, according to the culture in which the individual is living. This narrative

can take different forms - in some cultures it is oral, whereas in others written, informing an individual's world view (Sisk-Hilton & Meier, 2017).

 In Western society, narrative is a term which is associated with story (fictional) whereas in other cultures this narrative is rare, preferring to concentrate upon past experiences, revisiting old ideas and planning for the future based upon both. Moyles (2012) indicates that children become adept in recognising, anticipating, reading and responding to narratives as a direct result of the socialisation process which takes place in both home and school environments.

 According to anthropologists, narrative plays a distinctive role in sociocultural groups, particularly with regard to language development. Hall (2010) states that language learning is inextricably linked with culture and that language socialisation is the means through which individuals learn about how to communicate and behave appropriately in a specific situation within different communities (Cremin, Flewitt, Mardell & Swann, 2017).

Every environment to which children are exposed provides opportunities for learning, with these different environments being particularly valuable for those who are learning two or more languages simultaneously (Anderson, Anderson, Hare, McTavish & Prendergast, 2016).

It is exposure to these different environments which bring children into contact with different forms of discourse and genres other than narrative, for example, poetry and jokes. Even from an early age, children can manipulate the sound of their voice to provide meaning for those who care for them, and as children mature they begin to recognise patterns and structures which denote different types of discourse (Heath, 1986).

As children become more experienced with language they are able to anticipate what is coming next simply by hearing or reading short extracts which helps them to develop their understanding. Each different genre within a culture re-occurs in specific situations and are easily recognised by members of that community. Children learn to expect specific characteristics in particular settings and learn to regulate their behaviour and speech by making links between these familiar situations and new experiences that they encounter.

Hall (2010) indicates that different sociocultural groups provide diverse opportunities for their children to learn about how to express themselves and use narrative to develop their communication skills, with each community developing its own particular means of supporting oral language development (Bayetto, 2015).

Heath (1986) charts research as identifying four distinct, basic narrative genres. Three of these narrative genres report factual events in time - recounting, eventcasts and accounts - with the fourth being story (a fictionalised account of an event, or series of events). Recounting is a narrative which sees individuals presenting their past experiences to others, and is arguably the most common early language socialisation experience for children. It is common for parents, family and for practitioners to ask children to verbalise, and indeed to write, what they have experienced either on a first hand basis or from having read or heard about it. This type of narrative tends to follow a specific pattern in terms of chronology and message and/or content (Mallet, 2003).

The important thing as far as adults are concerned is that children can verbalise what has happened, even if they are unable to make judgements or surmise about why specific things have happened (Heath, 1986). An eventcast is a straightforward verbal replay or explanation of ongoing activities or of an event that is planned for the future. Children who engage in dramatic play with others utilised this genre to negotiate a specific, jointly achieved scenes, or scripts through verbal communication in order that objects take on symbolic functions (for example, a box becomes a car).

Heath (1986) states that this genre is prevalent when activities are interrupted as it causes individuals to talk about their thinking and reflect upon their language. Practitioners utilise this in order that specific points of learning can be broken down into small units, particularly with regard to language, so that a greater degree of understanding can be achieved (Pelatti, Schmitt & Justice, 2013).

The third genre, accounts, is child initiated, allowing individuals to share what they have experienced with others, as well as their thinking, without being prompted by adults (Berman, 2009). It is common for children to give accounts in response to a stimulus of seeing something which reminds them of past experiences, with their account following a predictable pattern so that the listener is able to follow and anticipate the outcome (Heath, 1986). This genre allows for much more individuality

as the speaker is in control of which specific parts of an account they wish to highlight - it could be their own views about specific scenes or comments about individual actors within the event. In their use of language with regard to this genre, individuals must ensure that they follow accepted patterns so that their listener understands the type of narrative with which they will be presented.

The most common form of narrative is that of story. According to Heath (1986) stories are different from accounts in the respect that they give a greater emphasis to patterns and structures, and afford speakers the opportunity to utilise language in unusual ways (supported by Brock, 2015). Listeners are also conscious, during the telling of the story, that they have an interpretive role to play, irrespective of whether the subject matter is real or imaginary. In order to develop these different genres, it is critical that children are provided with opportunities to observe and listen to others, rather than participating or directly interacting with those around them (Heath, 1986).

Vital to this process is the way that parents and practitioners encourage children to make use of language as a communication tool during the course of play. Evidence would suggest that it is important for adults to engage in a mixture of approaches towards play (directed and free) to facilitate children's language acquisition such that a mutually constructed dialogue can develop between participants (Shiel, Cregan, McGough & Archer, 2012).

It is critical for children's language development that they are encouraged to engage in play and to perform different functions, based upon their experiences, as well as to engage in free play. Playing a specific role allows children to develop their understanding of the world around them, making children feel more comfortable (Szarkowicz, 2000 cited in Robson, 2012, p. 93). Cutting and Dunn (1999 cited in Robson,, p. 94) highlight the value of utilising authentic, everyday contexts in developing children's understanding of the world and their role within it, with Szarkowicz (2000, p. 73 cited in Robson, 2012, p. 94) stating that narrative is the vehicle which "provides individuals with opportunities to be both in the realm of action and in the characters' minds simultaneously."

Nicolopoulou et al. (2006, p. 125) observe that "play and narrative are closely intertwined in young children's experience and development; in fact, symbolic of pretend play consists mostly of enacted narratives." They also state that there is a

growing body of evidence which suggests that children's learning of narrative skills in their early years has significant impact on their literacy.

Whilst acknowledging that children need to learn technical skills such as phonological processing, as well as letter and word recognition, they comment that children need to be exposed to a broader range of linguistic and cognitive skills which will allow them to become proficient readers for understanding. They argue that narrative activity in young children is one part of a supportive group of decontextualised oral language skills which facilitates children's language and literacy development, and therefore school success. They believe that language is decontextualised in that it involves utilising information outside of the supportive framework of conversational interaction, which does not have the support of background knowledge and clues. They state that this decontextualised language includes narratives, monologues, explanations and stories, the latter being particularly important as they allow children to build up a specific picture about their view of the world using only words (Nicolopoulou et al., 2006).

The use of narratives allows children to appreciate the potential of symbolic language to create both possible and fantasy worlds through words (Wells, 1986 cited in Nicolopoulou et al., 2006, p. 126). It is only through engaging with narrative that children are able to grasp the complexities of language, particularly in written form, with pretend play providing an important vehicle through which children can lay the foundations for their literacy.

Moyles (2012) also recognises the importance of narrative in terms of building notions of 'self' and our position in the world. She observes that providing children with opportunities to tell stories is critical for the development, particularly when considering the fact that children can often be seen playing with imaginary friends during the course of their pretend play. Children are able to supplant themselves into different characters from books and television in pretend play, which allows them to experiment with language for expression, and to provide opportunities for them to work out meaning in their lives. Moyles (2012, p. 100) states that "practitioners can utilise narrative play to enrich children's experiences and provide an understanding of their own and other cultures." The latter would seem particularly important in respect of the ever growing global society in which we live. She also observes that narrative

play supports children's self-expression and thinking, allowing individuals to interpret narratives in diverse ways, dependent upon their own culture.

 Moyles (2012) also points out that practitioners can make good use of narrative in order to develop good personal relationships between children, as a result of encouraging them to act out and to write down through diaries and/or stories (augmented with drawings and/or photographs), to foster empathy with each other. She also points out that children's socio-dramatic play which results from stories in their free play time is important in extending skills and understanding. For example, fables can provide opportunities for the development of imagery and sequencing, whilst acting out the story can help in terms of vocalisation, listening and interpretation as well as supporting social skills through interaction. Moyles (2012, p. 101) comments that "when children are imagining something in their play, it entails a process of conscious thought and visualisation, increasing brain activity and synaptic connections." She quotes Avril Brock (Moyles, 2012, p. 101) who states that stories provide opportunities for children to make connections between their existing knowledge and new knowledge, and that "encouraging playful contexts rich in the language of story facilitate opportunities to understand, consolidate and explore vocabulary through activities and experiences."

However, it is important to highlight that there are those who remain unconvinced by the claims surrounding pretend play. Lillard et al. (2013) conducted a review with regard to the benefits of play in respect of child development and the impact of pretend play on children's development. They looked at the evidence considering whether pretend play was critical to children's healthy development, whether it was one of many ways to positive development (equifinality) or that pretend play is an epiphenomenon involving other factors which motivate development. They considered evidence from a number of different domains.

The research conducted concerning language, narrative and emotion regulation was consistent with all three positions but insufficient to draw any firm conclusions. Evidence concerning social skills and executive function is seen to support the causal position but inadequate to distinguish between the other two. In terms of reasoning, equifinality is completely supported, dismissing the causal position whilst leaving the epiphenomenal position open for debate. They also state that there is no convincing

evidence that pretend play helps in terms of problem solving, with the position regarding intelligence, creativity, conservation and theory of mind being inconsistent in terms of the causal position, favouring the epiphenomenon position. Their overall conclusion is one which states that existing evidence makes no strong causal claims about pretend play being of unique importance for development and that much more stringent research is necessary in order to quantify its specific and/or potential role in children's development.

Chapter 5 Discussion

The themes that have emerged from the search of secondary data are that of characteristics of play and its impact on learning, theories about learning and play, developing oral language skills in early childhood, oral language and play, and Early Years provision in Saudi Arabia.

5.1. Characteristics of Play and its Impact on Learning

As it was described above, different authors define the term "play" different ways. However, most of them agree that paly can be characterized as motivated, flexible, meaningful, enjoyable, voluntary, sociable, interactive, and etc (Hughes, 2003; Fromberg, 2002; Brown, 2009). Many authors such as McIntyre (2012), Ginsberg (2007), and Wood (2004) regard this activity as a natural, and indeed essential, part of children's development which allows them to develop their social, emotional and physical skills whilst exploring their environment and engaging in interaction with those around them.

It allows children opportunities to explore language and how it is used in different circumstances as they adopt different roles, affording them the opportunity to develop an understanding not only of language but their position and role within society as they experience different environments (Duarte and Gutierrez-Gomez, 2007; Elkind, 2007; Robson, 2006; Rogoff, 2003). The act of playing is regarded as being critical in children's development, as it allows individuals to enhance their skills across a number of different areas of learning, including physical, social, emotional and cognitive (Ginsberg, 2007).

It is evident that there are a number of different types of play. Structured play is children's active engagement with activities and materials that have been supplied by adults, which allows them to experiment and learn specific skills; this often involves the observation of adults performing skills and/or a Q&A with pre-set questions (Lillemyr, 2009).

Structured play provides adequate levels of challenge for individuals and groups of children, whilst maintaining the fun element of learning. Free play is that which is led by children. As with structured play, the adults provide all the materials for them to play, with the difference being that the learning which takes place is led by the children, who creatively motivate their own learning, allowing them to pursue their own interests and to create their own plots and/or subplots as a part of their narrative and game playing (Weisberg et al., 2013; Hall, 2010; Mielonen and Patterson, 2009; Saracho and Spodek, 2006).

Lillemyr (2009) also identifies four distinct types of play: construction, creative, physical and imaginative. Construction play, as the name suggests, provides opportunities for children to utilise a variety of different materials to construct a different product using their imagination. This links with creative play, which also utilises music and dance, craft, art and painting, which allows children to better understand their emotions.

Physical play provides opportunities for children to develop their physical abilities whilst also allowing them opportunities to develop their problem-solving skills (Krause et al., 2003; Lindon, 2001). Imaginative play is also known as fantasy, symbolic, role or pretend play. This particular type of play provides learners with an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of different aspects of their daily lives through being able to adopt different roles and functions during the course of acting out a 'make-believe' scenario. This can range from acting out scenes from their home life such as helping their mum with the cooking and cleaning or helping their dad to repair the car or do DIY tasks. It can also involve fantasy play, where children act out scenarios involving superheroes or characters that they see from cartoons or the television such as King Arthur, Spiderman or Batman.

Often, during the course of this play, children use different objects to represent something else (symbolic play), for example a broom handle being employed to signify a horse (Lillard et al., 2012). The central element of play of this nature is that it is active, allowing children to utilise their imagination and creativity whilst engaging physically in problem-solving and interacting with others, which allows them to develop the cognitive and social skills which will propel them to greater heights as they gain in experience as they mature (Swift, 2017).

5.2. Theories about Learning and Play

Ideas about how children learn and appropriate pedagogy to facilitate their progress has changed in a cyclical manner during the course of the 20th and 21st centuries. The likes of Frobel mooted the notion that children should be allowed to play and interact with each other as opposed to being passive recipients of knowledge through conditioning (Ormrod, 2004), hence the notion of the kindergarten ('children's garden') where children were encouraged and nurtured in their development (Schunk, 2012). In allowing children opportunities to explore their environment and to drive

their own learning, the practitioner and/or adult in an Early Years environment becomes a monitor and facilitator who ensures that children have adequate stimulus materials to motivate their play and storytelling (Tovey, 2013).

There is a good deal of evidence which suggests that play is the vehicle through which children develop in the most holistic manner. Piaget suggests that children develop in specific stages which build upon each other and that at each stage, play plays an integral role in children's learning. Piaget put forward the notion that learning could only take place through experience and that through this process children were able to assimilate new information and make use of it through accommodation, which modified their actions (Piaget, 1973; Krause et al., 2003, Curtis and O'Hagan, 2003; Lindon, 2001).

Piaget's studies of learners concentrate on the physical/biological aspects of development appearing, according to some scholars, to overlook the impact of children socialising with others as a part of the educative process (Schunk, 2012). The social nature of learning was something which was emphasised by Vygotsky, who regarded the development of communication and language as central to children's development in a social context (Buchan, 2013).

Vygotsky is documented as stating that play was the most important vehicle for children to improve their skills and develop awareness of society and their role within it (Vygotsky, 1978; Pound, 2005). He emphasised the fact that children emerged from a process of copying the actions of others in gesture to having an active understanding of thoughts, words and actions of communication as a result of interacting with those around them (Vygotsky, 1978; Alexander, 2010; Bodrova and Leong, 2015).

Through interacting and communicating with more experienced others, children are able to develop their language skills and consequently other important skills which they require for their holistic development (Johnston and Nahmed-Williams, 2009; Greenwood et al., 2015). In essence, play is regarded by many as the means through which children are able to learn how to communicate effectively and the vehicle through which children learn societal values and culture through a mixture of free and guided play, providing them with authentic experiences that help them to develop their cognitive skills (Bergen, 2009; Sarama and Clements, 2009; Panksepp, 2008; Gee, 2008).

5.3. Developing Oral Language Skills in Early Childhood

Many writers regard oral language as the foundation upon which literacy is built (Hill, 2012; Bradfield et al., 2013; Gross, 2013; Haugen & Smart, 2012; Winch et al., 2010; Resnick & Snow, 2009; Kirkland & Patterson, 2005; Fillmore & Snow, 2002). Oral language has several components - phonology, grammar, morphology, vocabulary, discourse and pragmatics (Brooke, 2017). Through a process of listening and practice, children acquire the sounds within a language, which enables them to place syllables in words and words in sentences.

Armonia et al. (2015) described vocabulary as having expressive and receptive language contained within it; expressive language provides individuals with the tools to communicate with others in both verbal and non-verbal ways, with receptive language involving the process of listening and understanding of that communication. It is clear that as much information is contained in the way that something is said as well as the words that are being used to say it (Bayetto, 2015).

Grammar involves learners being able to understand how language is structured in order to make coherent sentences, with morphology looking at the construction of words and how they are placed within a sentence (Brooke, 2017).

Pragmatics involves learners understanding how language can be used in an acceptable way, which necessitates their understanding of different social expectations depending upon the environment in which they find themselves. Discourse is a critical skill which involves both oral and written communication, allowing learners to gather information and understanding from different forms of writing (Brooke, 2017).

In order for children to develop their oral language skills, they must be provided with an environment which is rich in stimulus and which looks to progress children's communication skills through interaction, not only in the teaching language but also their mother tongue (if the language of teaching is not the one that is spoken in the home environment (Communication Trust, 2013; Bayetto, 2015; Resnick & Snow, 2009).

Resnick and Snow (2009), amongst others, are keen to emphasise the fact that it is only through practising the use of language that children are able to develop their language skills, thus making it essential that practitioners build upon the work of parents in the home environment during the course of Early Years education (Bayetto, 2015). Oral language skills are vital if children are to be able to understand the written word, as they enjoy a symbiotic relationship with each other in terms of being able to understand and write in a given language (Reeder and Baxa, 2017; Morrow et al., 2016; Kennedy et al., 2012; Lawrence and Snow, 2011).

 Oral language skills allow for children to interact with each other, which allows them to develop skills through experience, leading to greater comprehension and practice of problem-solving and reasoning skills, as well as perspective taking in their interaction with others (Lawrence and Snow, 2011).

Language skills provide children with access to the world around them, with children learning how to interact with others in different contexts depending upon the language and the communication avenues that are utilised by those within specific environments (Law, 2015). It is therefore critical, particularly in the initial stages of children's education that any issues with regard to communication are identified and addressed to facilitate children's oral language development (Babaygit, 2012).

5.4. Oral Language and Play

As we have seen, the literature suggests that oral language and discourse has a fundamental role to play in children's holistic development, involving the development of specific skills which allow individuals to interact with each other, typically during play for young children (Lawrence and Snow, 2011).

Play is recognised as being a vehicle through which children's language can be developed, although it is a matter of debate the extent to which children play impacts upon their overall development (Weisberg et al., 2013). Evidence would suggest that it is through vehicles such as social pretend play that children develop their ability to interact in a reasonable manner with each other, and that their language acquisition is improved as a result of developing different verbal skills through adopting different roles as a part of their play (Katz, 2011).

Oral language development through play is deemed to be critical in the sense that oral language skills are not merely related to language; they are regarded as a cognitive skill (Brown, 1996; Kostelnick et al., 1989; Weisberg et al., 2013). It is important to note that adults have an important role in terms of language development through engaging in active questioning with children, thus providing them with an opportunity to explain what they are doing, and why they are doing it, which has a direct impact upon their ability to reflect and think for themselves (Weisberg et al., 2013). Weisberg et al. (2013) go as far as to say that there is a direct link between adult involvement in children's play and the development of language skills during their early childhood. Clearly, this has implications for parenting, with oral language development being directly related to the levels of stimulus that children are afforded within the home environment and the environments to which they are exposed (Roulston et al., 2011).

Parental contribution to oral language cannot be underestimated, with practitioners (when children enter the Early Years environment) building upon existing skills which children have developed as a result of interaction with their parents and their families (Mielonen and Patterson, 2009).

It is evident that there is much support for the notion that oral language develops as a result of social interaction and that language and literacy skills are derived as a direct result of play (Mielonen and Patterson, 2009; Tsao, 2008). Through engaging in pretend and symbolic play, children are able to experiment with language as they interact with those around them, developing their speech patterns and their understanding of how words fit together within a language; this is also evidenced in socio-dramatic play (Mielonen and Patterson, 2009; Tsao, 2008; Saracho and Spodek, 2006; Klenk, 2001; Hall, 1991).

It is through play that children are able to develop their oral language as they communicate with others in various different ways, enabling children to develop flexible literacy behaviour whilst sharing different ideas and developing their ability to think as an individual or as a member of a group (Hill, 2010; Saracho, 2004). The flexibility which children develop as a result of playing with each other allows children to develop their thinking skills whilst they are developing different texts and subtexts while utilising different objects as symbols, often attributing different

properties to objects and using imaginary implements or beings to augment their play (Stagnitti, 2011; Hall, 2010). As children mature and develop in terms of their language skills, they can be seen extending their pretend play to include authentic texts and subtexts which reflect their need to understand the world around them and to learn about cause and effect through symbolic thought (Moyles, 2012).

Narrative within pretend play is also seen to be of vital importance to children's language and overall development. This claim is the result of narrative surrounding us in our everyday lives (Abbott, 2008) and the belief that much of our reality is structured by narrative (Fulton, 2005). Barthes (1977) believes that narrative is the vehicle through which we are able to understand and define our perspective of the world and to develop our sense of our position in it, a notion which is supported by Heath (1986) and Moyles (2012).

 Research indicates that narrative can take either oral or written forms, dependent upon culture. Culture also influences the type of narrative that children experience, with Heath (1986) observing that young children become skilled in recognising and responding to narratives in different environments, depending upon where they are at any given time. Clearly, children's language acquisition and their ability to use language is very much linked with culture, in the sense that it is within this environment that they learn how to communicate and appropriate behaviours in specific situations.

 According to Moyles (2012) it is important that children are exposed to different environments in order that they experience different types of discourse and genre, which will enhance their ability to anticipate what is coming next and to tailor their responses accordingly. Research has shown that children expect certain things to happen in specific settings and moderate their behaviour and language according to their environment.

According to Heath (1986) children make use of three specific fact- based narrative genres (recounting, eventcasts and accounts; the fourth, story, is fictionalised rather than factual) to develop their language skills. to develop their language skills. Recounting, eventcasts and accounts all provide opportunities for children to tell others about their experiences through verbalising past events or future plans; the latter (accounts) allow individuals to share their thinking and their experiences

without prompting as a result of external stimuli which remind them of specific situations. This particular genre also affords greater opportunities for the speaker to provide a commentary or their personal views about individual characters or specific parts of their narrative, thus developing their cognitive skills as well as their ability to communicate their ideas to others. Story exposes learners to different patterns and structures in language and allows listeners the specific role of interpretation, making it vital that young children are provided with an opportunity to observe and listen as well as participate (Heath, 1986).

Pretend play is identified by Nicolopoulou et al. (2006) as fundamental to children's holistic development, as well as being a building block to children's literacy. It is their contention that narrative activity provides children with opportunity to develop language skills which are transferable across different environments so that individuals are able to pick up expected behaviours from their background knowledge and clues which are provided in specific contexts. They regard it as important to expose children to monologues, narratives, stories and explanations so that they are able to build up a sophisticated picture of the world around them, their position within it and there sense of 'self.'

In addition, narrative encourages learners to recognise that symbolic language is capable of helping them to create different scenarios in real and fantasy situations by utilising rich, expressive language. To that end, it would seem imperative that practitioners develop play activities which help to enrich children's experiences and to appreciate their own culture and that of others, both in their community and the world in general (Moyles, 2012).

The evidence has also indicated that there are those who are less convinced about the impact of pretend play with regard to children's development. In a study by Lillard et al. (2013) a review of evidence was conducted as to the impact of pretend play on children's development. The review began by stating that many articles concerning pretend play were positive about its benefits, including comments with regard to children's emotional, cognitive, physical and social development. It also drew attention to the fact that play is an undeniable right for all children and that many provisions for this age group are designed around play as a result of evidence which suggests its holistic benefits for children's development. In contrast to this, they

highlight the fact that many non-Anglo cultures do not place as much credence in this notion. The paper proceeds to define pretend play and provide an overall theoretical background to the notion of how play fits into children's development. Having looked at the evidence, they commented that some of the research was flawed as a result of methodological issues. They subsequently turned to conducting a descriptive review, looking the impact of pretend play in five subdomains - conservation, intelligence, problem-solving, creativity, and reasoning. They concluded that the evidence covering all of these areas was inconclusive with regard to pretend play having any impact upon children's cognitive abilities.

Similar conclusions are drawn with regard to the theory of mind and self-regulation, with those covering social skills being deemed to be inconsistent, thus undermining any form of causal position. However, the review did highlight links between children's levels of pretend play and their early language acquisition and development and their ability to use language in the telling of stories. This group also state that it is important that different forms of play are made available to children, as there is value in structured play sessions which target specific learning, as well as pretend play which allows children to relax and enjoy each other's company. In terms of pretend play, they concluded that it was not unique in terms of its impact on children's development, and that in order to establish its importance, there needs to be far more targeted research in this area.

5.5. Early Years – Saudi Arabia

Information with regard to structure and policy in Early Years education is available but studies and comment with regard to the approach that is adopted in the classroom is sparse (Aljabreen, 2017; Rabaah, Doaa and Asma, 2016). Within the Kingdom, a self-learning approach towards this phase of education has been adopted, although attendance and the provision of kindergarten, nursery and preschool is not compulsory (Al-Othman et al., 2015).

This self-learning approach is an amalgam of Western ideologies and Islamic principles which are acceptable within Muslim culture, with a specific set curriculum which has to be followed by practitioners; this curriculum seems to provide children with the opportunity to play and discover things through interacting with their

environment, whilst practitioners provide materials and activities which meet their needs (Al-Othman et al., 2015; Alomar, 2013).

 It is documented that the purpose of developing this curriculum was to move teaching away from more traditional, authoritarian methods to a more child-centred approach (Gahwaji, 2006). However, the restrictions which are placed upon practitioners seem to paint a different picture, in the sense that there is a constant dichotomy between the contents of policy documentation and the edicts which practitioners have to follow in terms of what must be taught, which is impacted by the Islamic culture (Rajab, 2016; Al-Othman et al., 2015; Alshaer, 2008; Albeiz, 2007; Gahwaji, 2006).

In spite of documentation which seems to support the notion of a child centred curriculum, evidence would suggest that Islamic cultural precepts and the need to ensure that children have a 'righteous upbringing' (Nyland and Alfayez, 2012; Aljabreen, 2017) are hampering the ability for teachers to provide opportunities for children to play. These restrictions would also appear to be opposed to Islamic teachings which indicate that children should be listened to, shown affection and provided with every opportunity to play (Nyland and Alfayez, 2012), with the issue of children's 'rights' being viewed not in terms of freedom and entitlement but in terms of moral behaviour (Gahwaji, 2006). This can be seen in the documentation provided by the MOE (2013) which indicates that children must be matched to the unit which has been designed by the government as opposed to adapting units to suit children's needs.

Children are even restricted in terms of what and how they are able to play - they are not allowed to play the role of the king or Princess (MOE, 2013 – 14), with one teacher stating that religion has the impact of preventing children from developing their ability to use their imagination, to be creative and to think for themselves (Rajab, 2016). This situation has elicited comments from practitioners that they are unable to teach children to think and are merely purveyors of information that children must learn (Rajab, 2016).

It is evident that this situation is apparent in spite of an acknowledgement that this stage of children's lives is vital in building the foundations for their future learning, and indeed the development of their character and personality (Aljabreen, 2017; Al-Mogbel, 2014; Abdel-Rasool, 1993). It would appear that the process of development

from more traditional methods is an ongoing process, where providers try to create a family atmosphere which encourages 'right behaviour' and provide opportunities for children to learn language through the creation of a more creative environment (Kaskary and Robinson, 2006).

However, it is troubling to note that there would appear to be a lack of information and understanding with regard to this phase of children's education and development on the part of officials, and, in spite of an awareness of practice across other nations, that there is a lack of application with regard to play in the formative years of children's lives (Albeiz, 2007; Al-Khireji, 1992).

Chapter 6 Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

The importance of play in the development of young children, particularly in terms of its influence upon oral language development appears to be well documented and supported. Engaging in play is part of a child's natural learning process which provides the means through which they gain an understanding not only of their environment and the world around them, but also of themselves (McIntyre, 2012, Ginsberg, 2007, Duarte and Gutierrez-Gomez, 2007, Elkind, 2007, Robson, 2006, Wood, 2004, Rogoff, 2003).

Engaging in play, whether structured or free allows individuals and groups of children to develop the skills that are essential for their being able to function well within society in their future lives (Lillemyr, 2009). Pretend play allows children to practice different roles and to utilise different language in diverse contexts to develop their sense of self and their position within society (Law, 2015, Weisberg et al., 2013, Katz, 2011).

It also enables them to understand the role of oral language as a form of communication, and its role in their lives in terms of the skills that they develop from it, forming part of their literacy skills (Weisberg et al., 2013). The use of language in communicating with others provides them with a social platform to learn how to express themselves properly in different circumstances, with different people. Clearly, this is important to facilitate their development as valuable members of society (Mielonen and Patterson, 2009, Tsao, 2008).

Play provides children with the ideal vehicle to develop their ability to use language, in the sense that they are able to experiment with it as they adjust to different roles as a part of interacting with others (Mielonen and Patterson, 2009, Tsao, 2008, Saracho and Spodek, 2006, Klenk, 2001. In addition to developing language and literacy, children are able to enhance their social skills through negotiating and cooperating with others as a part of their play (Heath, 1986, Moyles, 2012).

Pretend play provides children with a flexible mechanism through which they are able to develop their ideas and their thinking in different contexts and to learn to use their imagination to work out problems (Hill, 2010, Nicolopoulou et al., 2006, Saracho, 2004).

It is clear from the evidence that there is much work to do in Saudi Arabia with regard to the use of play within Early Years provision. Government policy documentation makes it clear that they are attempting to move towards a more child-centred approach but that in practice, restrictions that are placed upon educators by Islamic culture prevent them from being able to adjust the curriculum to meet children's needs (Rajab, 2016, Al-Othman et al., 2015, MOE, 2013, 2013 – 14, Alshaer, 2008, Albeiz, 2007, Gahwaji, 2006).

Ultimately, this will have the impact of children not being able to think in a creative manner and only being able to regurgitate information as opposed to utilise it in

solving problems. There is also the issue of a lack of understanding and application of play principles in this phase of children's education, which also hampers progress (Albeiz, 2007, Al-Khireji, 1992). It is unfortunate that this study was not able to find sufficient data in the literature that is specific to practice within Early Years classrooms in Saudi Arabia.

Future research in this area is of critical importance. If play is to be utilised effectively in order to facilitate oral language development, and indeed, the holistic development of young children in the Kingdom, research must be conducted in the classroom setting. This will enable researchers to make informed judgements about the extent to which the self-learning curriculum is being followed and how it is being delivered, as well is assessing whether play is being used as an effective vehicle for children's learning. In undertaking such a study, researchers will be able to inform the MOE as to how best to take things forward with regard to teaching and learning in the Early Years and how to enable policymakers, educators and practitioners to develop an authentic child-centred curriculum.

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